

Imperium

Maiden Voyage

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Foreword:

Firsty, thank you so much for reading!

I greatly appreciate you taking the time to enjoy the stories of the
Imperium, Belarin, and Craessa.

Feedback is always welcome. Any comments feel free to write to me on:

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Thanks again. Hope to have you reading more books soon!

A large furled mainsail flaps gently in the wind some several hundred yards from a long white beach backing onto a jungle canopy scattered with small spiky plants. Green goo from the jagged flora oozes onto a beached wooden rowboats' keel resting gently alongside a row of other shorecraft.

Further up the beach a small encampment of white tents stands facing the dense jungle canopy exuding small green yellow specs upon the air as if they were exhumed by the exhaling of the jungle before gently settling on the white sand.

Inside the largest of the tents a large though as of yet incomplete map lays spread across a wooden table flanked by a discussion regarding the progressing cartography.

'The St Tiago reports that she sailed for a day. No end to the land. No end to the jungle' she draws a short line to mark the progress of the exploration on the map before glancing up, inquisitively furrowing her eyebrows assessing the commander's reaction.

'Then I suppose we should hope that Findel's fruit experiments yield some success'. Findel is a young fair haired recruit currently devoted to determining which fruits are safe to eat, and which fruits are not.

The commander whose name is Belarin Tandale runs his hand through his black matted hair; which due to the close proximity of seawater is currently relatively clean by most counts. His hand bears a simple silver signet ring denoting his noble status and allowing him to securely facilitate and dispatch communications - not that there is so far anyone to communicate with on this seemingly endless stretch of island, though it is still tradition for it to be worn.

'Thank you, Cralessa' Belarin says with a nod. Cralessa crosses along the table. 'I'll be around if you need me, Commander.' she says with a gentle smile; her thick single braid flowing neatly behind her as she walks out. After twenty years of service together it becomes difficult not to predict one and other. Cralessa who volunteered for the militia at the age of twelve upon learning that her reproductive system had been one of the many ravaged by the great infertility plague of the year 712 almost thirty years ago had become close to Belarin after she joined the Imperial Expeditionary and

Exploration Force about twelve years prior. She had proved herself to be calm, collected and intelligent during a crisis and Belarin has kept her close ever since.

Belarin steps out into the camp; short shadows accompanying each tent indicate it is almost midday. A quick glance to the left shows a small number of sailors inside the medical tent suffering either from ingesting deadly poisons from fruits while others looking a pale grey from cuts infected with a greenish tinge from the local flora. Belarin approaches a small collection of barrels taking a moment to rinse his face with water from one of the barrels and reaches in to take a slightly stale loaf of bread from another. Belarin examines the fast growing vines that lie stomped into the ground after seemingly trying to penetrate the water barrel when he is approached by the young fair haired sailor by the name of Findel.

‘I’ve made some progress on the fruits, sir’ says Findel, his high pitched voice sounding slightly raspier than usual ‘it seems as if the juices are poisonous when eaten, but once dried out have no ill effect. We’re trying to dry out some of the purple ones now’

‘Thank you, Findel’ replies Belarin, tearing the loaf of bread in half ‘and take this to keep your strength up. I shall look forward to having dried fruits with our meal at sunset’ .

Findel gratefully accepts the bread and heads off to continue his duties while Belarin continues to the far side of the camp where a small company of men prepare for departure under the supervision of Arms Master Briggs. The scraping of grindstones and donning of armour stops briefly on Belarin’s arrival though continues promptly on his signal. The arrays of polished plate and chainmail gleaming in the sun with cuirasses being fastened onto men whilst arms and legs are protected from the jungle by only trousers and shirts of khaki and cloth. It will be poor protection against any animals or blades however so far the most vicious enemy to be encountered is the jungle’s predatory humidity and heat.

“Briggs’ says Belarin with an affirmative handshake and nods to the strong and stout looking gruff man with a wealth of experience Belarin one day hopes to emulate.

‘Everything’s ready on your order, sir’ replies Briggs, even his years of experience and military discipline must be straining under the now sweltering midday heat.

‘Cralessa tells me the ruins about five hundred yards into the forest’
Aye, sir, but it’ll be slow getting there through the thickness of this Jungle.’

The Jungle

Brigg’s assessment was not wrong. The laborious cutting of leaves alongside the careful movement to avoid small cuts by infectious plants make for slow going indeed. Beads of sweat run down the faces of the entire party as well trousers soaked even before reaching halfway to the ruins. The sun has made fair progress to the west by the time Belarin’s party reaches the large clearing with the ruins. Four large stone statues depicting tree-like tentacular beasts surround a stone bunker. Small cracks in the bunker’s stonework have allowed vines to seep inside as well as grow wildly around the surface. Slowly led by Belarin and Briggs the party of men creep forward carefully eying the upcoming terrain for any traps or dangers. The statues seem to stare intently into Belarin as he approaches the front of the stone structure in the middle. The two closest statues, one suffering from a fracture in what would be its skull with vines burrowing deep into it while the other one whose limbs are entangled in years of overgrowth, survey the area with a particularly eerie and vacant stare.

Cautiously Balerin steps into the overgrown bunker, the air becoming noticeably cooler as he descends down the stairs, the way ahead lit only by small cracks in the structure’s surface. From behind, Briggs passes forward a torch to help light the way. The light reveals intricate carvings along the wall. Small figures gather around a large tentacular tree - similar in design to that of the ominous statues outside. The objects in the figures hands have faded beyond recognition so as to whether they are worshipping, destroying, or harvesting is unclear though each figure has unmistakably been given eyes of an unnatural looking yellow as if their eyes had been replaced by those of a fearsome venomous lizard.

Further along the stairway a second carving is visible along the left hand side of the wall, the same yellow eyed figures burying what appears to be a wolf or other canine at the foot of the same great tree, an almost parallel scene is mirrored on the other side of the tree except the animal is no longer being buried yet seems fully revived with all but one of the figures now kneeling down in admiration. The beast's eyes are aglow like the sun while the single standing figure reaches his arm forward as if to administer a blessing, his eyes are clear and more natural - whether this a purposeful omission or an effect administered by the fading of time is impossible to tell.

The staircase continues into the depths of the earth with occasional adjacent rooms either empty or blocked off with rubble and debris. The stairway gradually narrows until it finally opens out into a large audience chamber. For a third time, the same creature is depicted by a single larger statue in the centre of the chamber alongside great vines entangled about the cold stone floor. Belarin and the party advance forward. Behind the statue a fissure has opened up allowing the growth of three extraordinarily large roots through the hole.

“Sir, do you think that could be where all the vines are coming from?” Briggs whispers hoarsely.

‘Perhaps’ replies Belarin. The vines are certainly ubiquitous though the vines concentrated around this hole seem larger and many around the three main appendages are entangled into larger conglomerate roots. Cautiously Belarin approaches the centre of the room wherein lies the emergence of roots. To his right he is accompanied by one of men holding out in front of him a burning torch. Looking down into the abyss reveals only further darkness with the light of the torch able to penetrate no more than a few feet down. ‘Let's see what's down here’ thinks Belarin to himself, taking the flaming torch from the outstretched hand behind him. As he drops the torch down through the centre of the branches the light flickers around revealing a huge complex of large tangled branches. Scores of orangy yellow eyes can be seen reflecting the torch's light until the torch is finally extinguished or at least vanished from view.

At that moment one of the larger branches that has climbed up the wall crashes down upon the man next to Belarin, sending him crumbling to the floor. Before there is a chance to react, multiple branches start to plummet down from the walls and ceiling as well as coiled smaller branches shooting out like snakes from curled up positions on the ground.

‘By Tiago, the plants are alive!’

‘Everyone back’ Bellows Briggs

In a grouped formation the men start moving back toward the stairway, though already multiple cuts and bruises are beginning to show from the plant’s strikes upon exposed and cloth covered skin. The plants are striking too numerous and too fast.

‘Faster!’ calls out Belarin.

The increased speed will increase the risk of tripping and stumbling upon the vines still dormant on the ground but at the current pace and under the current amount of fire there is no chance of making it out unscathed. They reach the stairs.

‘Go! Quickly!’ shouts Balarin getting the straggling men onto the slight safety of the stairway, a stray vine slicing against his raised forearm’s leather bracer. Briggs is positioned further up ushering everyone further up the stairs.

The few vines that litter the stairway still seem dormant as they rush up to the surface, the gleaming yellow eyes of the wall carved figures staring intently as if eyeing up their prey. At the top of the stairway Briggs is hacking his way through another set of vines that has entangled itself in front of the entrance, creating a seal that only faint beams of light can slither through. Briggs’ sword continues to hack at the vines, each swing like a pendulum counting the fading seconds of their chance to escape. An ominous slithering can be heard behind them.

‘Briggs! It’s now or never!’

Brigg’s cutting continues. More light is coming through but not yet enough is cleared to make an exit.

‘Briggs!’

The approaching vines are now beginning to coil in preparation to spring. The closest vine is only about three feet away. Belarin is about to call out for the third time when he looks around to see Briggs finally crashing through recently made defenses. Men begin to pour through the opening. One man next to Belarin is skewered through the knee and dragged down the stairs behind the advancing row of vines. Ignoring the screams for help Belarin follows the others through the opening to be met with more large vines crashing down upon a few of Belarin other unsuccessful fleeing companions. What was a few moments ago an orderly retreat has now turned into a full blown rout.

Balerin dives suddenly forward, narrowly avoiding a large root crashing down overhead. He picks up pace through the clearing, dodging and ducking under the array of vines flailing blindly around. Belarin catches sight of Briggs waving to him from just under the edge of the jungle canopy.

‘Briggs, we have to get back to camp’

‘Aye sir, the rest of the men are heading through the jungle now.’

While the rest of the men may be heading through the jungle, if the plant life within there is now as deadly as that which was in the underground cavern they may not be heading out.

Faint screams begin ominously echoing out from deeper in under the canopy.

‘We’ll help who we can, but our main priority is getting back to the camp’

Briggs gives a single nod in agreement and they begin to make their way at pace through the jungle.

Race to Camp

Belin hacks frantically at the vine wrapped around Briggs’ neck. The vine gives way but already the spikes protruding from the plant have sent dark red fluid streaming out from Briggs’ throat as he gasps and falls to the ground. Immediately more vines come slithering into the area. Reluctantly, Belarin takes off again through the jungle pushing through the dense foliage. Briggs and Belarin had previously passed two of their party, now being consumed by this now awakened creature. If their sense of direction has been correct the camp should only be an extra 30-40 feet, though through the thickness of the jungle anything lurking beyond a few arms lengths is impossible to discern.

Belarin guessed right. He emerges from the underbrush only a few hundred feet from the camp. Or what was the camp. Only two of the tents remain standing whilst the rest are toppled or torn beyond repair. A chaotic scene lies in front of him with several figures grappling around what remains of the camp, a few men scrambling to launch the small boats and a body lying face down twitching slightly between Belarin and the camp. Quickly, Belarin moves to the man lying face down closest to him. His body is still twitching. Belarin rolls him over. It is one of the men from the medical tent. His face now greyer than before with veins exposed around his neck and temple though with a rough surface and brownish colour. Suddenly his eyes open and he grabs Belarin. Biting like a vicious animal and clawing with root like sharp fingernails. He is hissing and clawing on top of Belarin inches from his face his mouth now coughing out fluorescent jungle spores, with Belarin only now noticing he is no longer staring in the eyes of a man but a creature whose sclera, iris, and pupil have taken on a glowing ghostly yellow.

Regaining his senses, Belarin shoves the abomination off onto the ground next to him and scrambles to his feet sprinting toward the encampment. 'Cralessa!' he calls as he recognises one of the figures engaged in a scuffle within the camp. At that moment he notices it. Cralessa is occupied by keeping the teeth of one of the yellow-eyed diseased sailors out of her throat, so she does not notice the long branch snaking along behind her positioning itself for an attack. Belarin increases his pace to try and intercept the branch before it can attack Cralessa. He is getting closer. Almost there. Then he sees it. His mind becomes a fog. He stumbles to the ground overwhelmed with images of the man being dragged down the stairs in the cavern, the yellow eyes staring from the walls, Briggs coughing blood onto the jungle floor and the jungle spores coming from the creature's mouth. He is dazed only a moment but as he comes back to reality he knows it is too late. The branch whips across the back of Cralessa leaving a long open cut in its wake. Green thorns lay embedded around the wound gently oozing sticky infectious greenish pus into the breached flesh.

A long homeward voyage

The branch retreats as Belarin hacks at it with his sword before it can strike for a second time. Cralessa plunges a knife into the neck of the now grey skinned sailor assaulting her, yellow sap like blood oozing from his neck as he falls to the ground. Cralessa drops to her knees in a mixture of disorientation and exhaustion. Behind them the first sailor who had been rolled face down is gradually closing the distance between them with a wound related slow crawl while behind them a new array of branches begin emerging from the forest, some dragging away bodies lying on the beach while others slither toward their remaining prey.

‘Are you alright?’ Asks Belarin as he kneels down beside her.

‘Fine’ she says breathlessly and stoically gently waving him off.

She is likely in a lot of pain, however it is hardly worthwhile voicing those concerns until they are in place of some amount of safety.

A few sodden loaves of bread are washed up upon the shore and Belarin clocks one of the bread loaf containing barrels only a few meters from the waterline. Belarin guides Cralessa into the water where they wade a few feet before clutching the barrel and using it to help them float out to the safety of their larger ships anchored out to sea.

Once they see Cralessa and Belarin, what's left of the crew of the Blue Nightfin send out a shorecraft to bring them aboard.

Some sailors are trying to busy themselves going about their duties while others simply sit in shock. Fair haired Findel sits on the starboard side of the ship clutching one of those dried purple fruits trying to process the past few hours.

One hundred and eight sailors joined for this voyage. Now, between the three ships that number sits at around thirty. A great deal of those lost only between now and when the sun was at its highest earlier in the day.

Cralessa rests herself against the side of the ship. Already the cut on her back is becoming green and the surrounding skin showing hints of grey. It is a six week journey between here and the Imperial mainland and it is impossible to tell how far the infection will have come by the time they arrive there.

A brief moment passes where Belarin closes his eyes and prays for salvation, deliverance back home and that no additional tragedies befall them and then he organises the men and begins their voyage home.